OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

A VAGRANT FORTUNE

BY ELLIOTT FLOWER

TOM GRETT had made the trip from an outlying bank to its down-town correspondent every day, Sundays and holidays excepted, for more than a year, and nothing ever had happened to disturb the routine. So Tom Grett became careless. The satchel that he carried always contained a considerable sum in cash and much more in checks, but the fact that he was custodian of so much money had ceased to worry him. The fact had lost its significance.

There came into the car one day, when he was making his regular trip to the down-town bank, another man with another satchel, and the other man deposited the other satchel beside Grett's. They were very similar in appearance—the satchels, not the men—and Brett, if he had not been entirely oblivious, could hardly have failed to notice that the stranger's partly displaced the other. But Grett was deep in an account of the latest murder or scandal or war scare, and he remained thus absorbed until his station was reached, when he hastily picked up the stranger's satchel and left the car.

The stranger was busy with the "Help Wanted" advertisements of his own paper and did not even look up when Brett left; but, at the next station, he shoved the paper into his coat pocket, grabbed the remaining satchel, and hurried out.

Grett went directly to the Third National Bank, nodded to the teller, deposited the satchel on the window-shelf for convenience in opening, and gave an exclamation of surprise and alarm. This satchel, while a duplicate of his in other respects, was newer and cleaner. He opened it with trembling hands, disclosing a seersucker coat and a cigar-box containing penholders and pencils and a number of newspaper clippings.

"My God!" he cried, "I've been robbed!"

"How?" asked the teller.

"This isn't my satchel," he said in bewilderment.

His face was white, his eyes almost popping out of his head, and he seemed to have lost the power of connected thought; he stared at the satchel, as if expecting the contents to change under his gaze to banknotes and checks.

The cashier, seeing that something was wrong, hurried up, and Grett was taken behind the railing. Sensations are not popular in banking circles; the emotional public misunderstands and exaggerates them, so it is advisable to keep them from the public.

"A case of deliberate substitution," declared the cashier, when Grett had told his story. "Telephone your bank. They will want to put the police on it at once."

Grett seemed also at the point of collapse, but the sharp, vigorous tone and manner of the cashier had a bracing effect, and he recovered his nerve in some measure. Unquestionably the bank should be notified immediately, in order that everything possible might be done to recover the satchel.

The North Trust and Savings Bank was not a large institution, and the loss of sixteen thousand dollars in currency could not be accepted philosophically by its officers. It followed, therefore, that President Andrew Farwell was excited and distressed by the message that came to him over the telephone. Nevertheless, being a man of quick decision, he planned and acted promptly.

All the usual precautions were taken—the police notified, and an advertisement written, "$500 reward for the return of the satchel and its contents," and sent to the evening papers.

There was some debate over the advertisement, Cashier Aiken holding that it was unwise to make their loss thus public, but President Farwell maintained that they should overlook nothing that gave the least promise of lessening the loss.

The railroad company reported that no such satchel had been turned in to the lost and found department, and the guard, when questioned, declared that he had seen none.

"That proves it to be a premeditated theft," asserted Aiken. "An honest finder would have turned it in.

"And we have about one chance in a thousand of recovering the money," he added.

"Just about that," agreed Farwell ruefully. "A vagrant fortune—even a small one—hasn't much chance in this city. We're probably out sixteen thousand dollars in cash, and we can't tell how much on the checks."

They faced it for two hours in ever-deepening gloom. The satchel had been lost a little after ten o'clock in the morning, and it was nearly one when a shabby stranger entered the bank. The shabby stranger carried the missing satchel. Officers and employees seemed to rise as one man, when they saw it, but the shabby stranger ambled along wearily and unconcernedly. The stranger paused and looked about him doubtfully; the office force waited breathlessly, hoping it was not a dream. It seemed almost impossible that so shabby a man should be in possession of the mislaid fortune.

The stranger broke the spell by advancing to the cashier's desk. "Lose anything?" he asked.

Aiken drew a long breath. "Sixteen thousand dollars and some checks," he said.

"Whew!" exclaimed the stranger, "I'm glad I didn't know I had so much." He handed the satchel to Aiken. "I guess it's all there."

It was. Aiken and Farwell went over the cash together, and there was not a banknote missing. The checks they took on faith.

"Where did you find it?" asked Farwell.

"In my hand," was the reply. "The first I knew, I was carrying the wrong grip, and the papers showed that it belonged to you."

"How long ago was that?"

"Two hours, I guess. I was tired and I walked slow."

"Walked!" exclaimed Farwell. "Why didn't you ride?"

"Spent my last nickel going down-town for a job. Had one half promised, but this looked more important."

"You had sixteen thousand dollars, and you walked!" Farwell found this incomprehensible.

"Sure. It wasn't mine. Anyhow, I didn't know how much there was."

"Didn't you count it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of myself. They say every man has his price, and I was afraid I might find mine."

"I guess old Diogenes was looking for you," remarked Farwell with a smile.

"Who's he?" asked the stranger.

"He's the fellow who was looking for a man who could do what you have just done. It takes a man to be honest when he's so desperately hard up."

"That's all," returned the stranger simply; "just a man."

"I suppose you want the reward," said Farwell.

"Well," admitted the stranger, "I thought there might be some reward, and I don't see how I could back away from it."

"The reward," said Farwell, " is five hundred dollars, and we shall further make it a point to see that you get a satisfactory position. I rather think we know enough about your honesty to vouch for it. Don't we, Mr. Aiken?"

"I'd go on Mr. ——"

"Hawkins," said the stranger; "Robert Hawkins."

"I'd go on Mr. Hawkins' bond unhesitatingly," declared Aiken.

"Thank you," returned Hawkins gratefully, "but I think I have a job. It was half promised, and I was on my way to report when this happened. If I could get my own satchel——"

"Grett, our messenger, has it," explained Farwell. "We ordered him to report to the police and give them all the information he could before coming back here. Perhaps," thoughtfully, "we might give you his job."

"Oh, no," protested Hawkins; "I wouldn't want to take another man's job that way. He was a bit careless, but the fellow who has been caught once is the safest afterward. I don't want anybody discharged for me. Besides, I'm a bookkeeper."

"That's all right," said Farwell. "We'll make a place for you."

Hawkins hesitated. "No," he said resolutely, "I promised to show up at the other place to-day, and my word is sacred. I must report there anyhow; they may be waiting for me."

"Mr. Hawkins," said Farwell earnestly, "I think you carry your conception of good faith a little too far, but it is a commendable and unusual failing. If you do not get a satisfactory position there, come back."

Hawkins, the honest, seemed to be relieved and encouraged. He thanked them, told a little more of his pathetic struggle for work, arranged to have his satchel sent to him and then left.

But once outside he heaved a deep sigh of relief, after which he laughed so heartily as to attract the attention of other pedestrians. "I thought they'd sure nail me to a job before I could break away," said Hawkins. Then, being out of sight of the bank, he entered a saloon and urged the bartender to make all haste in putting out a "man's size" drink of whisky. And, strangely enough, he paid for this drink without breaking any of the bills that had been given him at the bank. After that, with a good cigar in his mouth, he boarded the smoking car of an "L" train and proceeded comfortably to his boarding-house.

He there discarded the shabby clothes, and donned the raiment of a warm sport, after which he journeyed to a billard-hall for relaxation. In the course of this relaxation he was the victim of occasional uncontrollable and inexplicable bursts of mirth.

Later—at seven o'clock that evening, to be exact—he sought a table in an obscure corner of an obscure restaurant. One seat at this table was already occupied by Tom Grett, bank messenger, but Hawkins seemed not at all disturbed by this. In fact, he gave Grett a wink and a jovial smile, took a seat beside him, and called for a drink.

"How about it?" inquired Hawkins.

"All right," answered Grett. "The old man read the riot act and shifted me to an inside job—said I was too careless for a messenger—but he didn't fire me. I knew he wouldn't."

"Thank me," laughed Hawkins. "He tried to give me your job, and I wouldn't take it. Say! he had me up a tree for a few minutes! When I backed away from that, he wanted to turn me loose on the books. Honest, he had me worried; I thought he was going to put me on a stool by main force. I had that satchel of mine rigged up right for the part, didn't I?"

"Great!"

"How do I stand with the frosted bunch?"

"Great!" exclaimed Grett enthusiastically. "They'll back you for a dime museum exhibit of the original honest man any day you want to pose for it; they'd turn you loose in the vault with the light out; they've got you down as the good young man who needs to be encouraged and helped; they're going to look you up."

"Oh, I'm not so poor," said Hawkins, swelling up with the pride of achievement; "I might make a few dollars on the vaudeville circuit if I had the heart to work steady. Say! my tongue was hanging out of my mouth when I was waiting for it to be time to go in and see the old billy-goat. Oh, I guess I'm fair."

"You're not the whole show," retorted Brett, with sudden jealousy. "Look at the little play I put on when I discovered I'd been robbed! I guess I'd qualify for the emotional drama all right."

"But there ought to have been more money in it," complained Hawkins, passing quickly from pleasure to business.

"I haven't seen any yet," hinted Grett.

Thus reminded, Hawkins counted out two hundred and fifty dollars and passed it to his companion. "But there ought to have been more," he insisted. "I thought he'd come up better for the bunch I gave back to him."

"Pretty fair for a job that's safe," argued Grett.

"Oh, it's a good enough scheme," conceded Hawkins, "but we can't work it but once, and it's got the art in it that ought to pay high. As an actor I think I'm worth more money; no dub could have played that scene at the bank the way I did."

"They paid five hundred dollars to see the show," said Grett. "Isn't that enough for any show?"

"Not for a special performance," answered Hawkins. "This was an awful good show."

"Well," said Grett, when the merriment had subsided, "we've got the money to invest; now how about the good thing?"

"Framed up for Saturday—Highboy at ten to one," replied Hawkins.

"Sure, is it?" persisted Grett.

"A cinch," asserted Hawkins. "I'm going to plunge on it for all I've got and can borrow."

"You slipped up on the last one," suggested Grett.

"That was a chance, but this is sure," explained Hawkins. "I'm next to the right people. The only way Highboy can lose that race is to lie down and die on the track."

"Ten to one," mused Grett. "Twenty-five hundred is worth having." He handed his two hundred and fifty dollars back to Hawkins. "Put me on," he instructed.

"I'll mail you the ticket," said Hawkins.

Saturday afternoon Grett slipped out and sought the nearest ticker.

"A fellow can do something with twenty-five hundred," he reflected.

The ticker informed him that Highboy "also ran." He thought it must be a mistake, but the telephone confirmed the news.

"Well," he decided, wtih regretful philosophy, "it isn't like losing real money, for this was 'velvet.'"

Nevertheless, he was not in high spirits when he presented himself at the little window through which the salaries were passed out.

"Nothing for you," said the man behind the grating.

"What!" cried Grett.

"Nothing for you," repeated the man.

"But I'm not discharged," expostulated Grett.

"No," was the reply," but there's five hundred dollars charged up against you—the cost of your carelessness, you know. You'll be able to work it out in four or five months."

PITY'S ALIAS

BY CLOUTSHAM COMBE

IT disturbed me that my sister Mehitabel had not gone at once to call on my bride-elect. I demanded the reason, or rather, her excuse.

"I'm too fond of Janet," was her pungent reply.

Of course I long had known that I never had come up to what Mehitabel believes a brother of hers should be.

"Janet is a half-orphan, and she's got a lot of riches to be taken care of, poor girl, and what would you know about that?"

"I?" answered I. "Well," I struggled on, thinking hard, "a crisis develops the man, you know."

"Another thing that bothers me," she followed up, "is that you never respect persons whom you get the better of in a horse trade, as you did of Janet. You at once consider them of inferior intelligence."

"Absurd," said I. I had thought that Mehitabel would have appreciated the humor of the ruse whereby I had gained Janet—insisting that if she wanted my cleverest pony she must take me, too.

"But this transaction with Janet as to the pony and me was straight. Don't you see? I like her, Mehitabel, more than like her—you know what I mean. Now please, as a good girl, go to Janet, throw your arms around her neck and say—say, with a little pathos: 'Janet, he's my brother!' Sadly, you know, just like that. You wouldn't be committing yourself a particle. I am to speak to Janet's mother today," I mentioned, earnestly. "Perhaps you will go afterwards?"

As I went down the steps I looked at the future with a different eye. There were some responsibilities abroad in the world. Life was going to be much more than it had been to me. I made so many excellent resolves, under the sense of my delight in Janet and her fine pointed mother, that it became imperative that I should impress my sister Mehitabel with these new determinations. Which I did, quite eloquently, I am sure, describing also how pleasantly Mrs. Redingstone and I had hit it off together.

This had some effect, for when I saw Janet the next day she remarked: "Your sister, dear, is quite touching about our engagement."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. She threw her arms around me and cried: 'He's my brother, you know, Janet,' as if she simply could not endure losing you!"

Something in the tone and something in the merry eyes put me on my guard; so I responded carelessly: "Mehitabel is all right. A little coltish, may be. But all she needs is some plunging about the ring."

"I am glad to have her vouch for you. For, of course," Janet slyly pursued, "you did, you know, trick me a little bit on that pony!"

"It's true," I passed it off, "I drove rather a hard bargain. In stipulating that I must go with him, I was taking advantage of your great desire for the pony. Have you any regrets?"

"Oh, no—I hope I'm a good sportsman; I hope I can take a beating. But you must admit that Pity has a splint and shies at his shadow."

Some phases of spirit in Janet were still beyond me. In addition to not yet knowing her very well—our betrothal had come, literally, at a gallop—I felt at a disadvantage with her on account of Mehitabel, who, from having been at the same school a year before, knew Janet on close terms.

For days these girls seemed to find consuming delight in each other. They came to have some amusing secret which frequently caused them to break forth into preposterous merriment in my company. Two girls with confidences certainly can keep a man miserable.

Going into Janet's stable in Fifty-sixth Street to borrow a kicking strap, I found Pity under the hand of Janet's groom. There was a rustle of skirts, and the hurried patter of small heels around the end of the neat stalls. Pretending, for the sake of dignity, that I had noticed nothing, I asked for the strap, and went out. As I opened the door I saw, down the sidewalk, for an instant, the backs of Janet and Mehitabel. Next instant, before I had stepped over the threshold, they had whirled about and were coming toward me!

"You spoke once of wanting a tandem. Well, I've found a possible wheel horse to go with Pity," I said. "Just borrowed a kicking strap of your groom to try him out in the Park."

"But," objected Janet, while Mehitabel turned aside, "Mit and I—up on the Grand Concourse—already have found a striking match for him. It's a sort of cross-match; he has blue dun points," she said with twitching lips. "With the four white feet of Pity prancing in front, wouldn't the effect of these blue dun stockings on the wheel horse be sporty? I wish you would go with me tomorrow and look him over?"

I said I would, with this reservation: "You shall be the one to choose. I want him to please you."

"Oh, I don't want to choose!" she protested, with alarm. "I've no faith in my judging abilities any more!"

When Janet stopped for me at the Riding Club, it was with a limousine motor.

"Why not drive Pity? I can manage him, and we'd see them together," I questioned.

"Too long a distance for any of the horses," said Janet.

The ride, the keen air coming through the lowered windows, or possibly her own thoughts, caused her gray eyes to turn amethystine; they glistened as violet as snow of a sunny afternoon. Once or twice I fancied them, as they turned my way, half compassionate and half grave, but always an instant after mysteriously merry.

We neared Kinney's. I thought to show Janet the fighting cocks. In a burst of sentiment I said: "Janet, I'll show you a [illegible] Mehitabel never saw. Stop at Kinney's," I ordered.

She brightened. "Kinney's? Why, that's where we're going—that's where the pony is!"

"Kinney's? You're not thinking of buying from old Kinney? Why, child, Kinney would swindle a saint of his halo!"

"But, dear," she responded, "have you any such tangible asset?"

Kinney himself, ruddy and hearty, came out. When he saw me he stood agog for a moment. His ploughed brow rolled deep troubled furrows. I caught Janet passing a strange glance at him—as if to say—"Please be discreet." Aloud she said, "Where is the pony?"

Again Kinney turned on me sidewise, the hesitant look with which he had met me. I interpreted it to mean that there was a word he would like to say out of hearing of Janet. I was about to ask him aside when Janet again emphasized: "We haven't much time, Mr. Kinney." At that he reluctantly went off to the stables.

"I like Mr. Kinney," remarked Janet; "he is very genuine."

"My dear," I expostulated, "hold up—he's about to attempt to sell a horse."

Light was bad in the yard where the pony appeared; the high fence threw a shadow over him. It was evident, however, that in size and conformation, Janet had found for Pity a mate which one might have searched years for. Save for the markings—the blue dun points—the correspondence was, to my memory, perfect; here was, except for the absence of white stockings, a flawless "ringer" for Pity!

When Kinney walked him, and when he trotted him, the lifting, dainty movements compelled me to inquire: "What's his price, Kinney?"

His price was steep. I went up to the pony's head. As in Pity, there was the same dent above the eye that comes from having a mother that is aged—the same pert ears—the deep chest. I was amazed at our luck. I said to Kinney: "Too bad he hasn't a spot of white on him." One has to exhibit some dissatisfaction.

"If you like the pony—he ain't mine, sir, you know—I might take off twenty-five from the price, as the lady ownin' him wants a good owner for him."

"What's his name, Mr. Kinney?" inquired Janet ingenuously.

"Let's see"—Kinney faltered—"some religious name—Contribution, I think, Miss."

"Retribution?" prompted Janet.

"Beg pardon, Miss; yes, Miss,—Retribution."

I stooped and ran thumb and finger down one cannon bone. Not a blemish. But the coat was sticky. I felt a tug, felt a breath on my cheek, and saw that the little rascal had the very trick of Pity; he was playfully pulling the handkerchief from my breast pocket! Janet, standing near Kinney, turned half away.

"Janet," I called, "look!"

She only answered, "Yes, I see!" her muff over her face. I bent and ran thumb and finger down the other cannon bone. What? Why, he had a splint precisely where ——

Head down, tracing it, conscious of the odd stickiness of the blue dun coat, all of a sudden I was impelled to part the hairs.

Underneath, at the roots, the coat showed white!

"Kinney," I called to the ruddy-cheeked taverner. "Is this pony worth any more than the high dollar?"

He responded reticently: "I say, sir, you won't regret taking him at the price." I was sure he was aching to wink.

"Kinney," I pursued in a voice full of conviction, "he's well worth the money. Send him down in the morning. And," I added distinctly, "just as he is—mind—don't clean him!"

I felt Janet's eyes fasten upon me.

"Right you are, sir!" returned Kinney, immensely relieved and at last jovial.

We started; Janet, stealing furtive glances at me, appeared at first hopeful and easy. This gave way to a tender worry; and then she became utterly cast down. I kept silent and sober with enormous difficulty, noting how each succeeding arc light along the darkening road lit up the changing emotions in her sweet face.

"So the pony is called Retribution, is he, Janet?" I at last broke out.

"Don't!—don't!" she sighed. "You, at any rate, didn't doctor him up when you sold him to me!"

"But still, perhaps I did ask too much precious boot!"

After awhile I allowed myself to remind her, tentatively, of the new status of things which she and Mehitabel had brought about—for there was a new status:

"Tonight, you understand, I am again by purchase the possessor of the matchless Pity, alias 'Retribution?' And besides, since the pony and I go together, I regain possession of myself."

She murmured something. I suppose it was the vibration of the car over the neglected city pavement which give that jiggity-joggle to her voice; but the tremor moved me deeply.

One hand got into the muff where hers were. She took it firmly. So repentant was she that I weakly admitted, from my heart: "Dear one, I'm relieved to learn that you and Mehitabel are not very dangerous deceivers."

When she continued, it was more collectedly, and there was something dancing in the iris of her deep eyes as she answered:

"Would it be unsportsmanlike," she said, "to call it off? For you know, I am really rather attached to—Pity!"